

Rotating Extension Column

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### **Watermelon – A Delicious and Interesting Crop**

Little compares to the taste of a sweet, locally grown watermelon. With the first big bite, an extra good one will temporarily steal a breath or two until your taste buds adjust to this culinary delight.

Normally some local growers are marketing melons by the first or second week of June, but this has not, so far, been a normal growing season. Due to a cold spring, planting was delayed and young seedlings that were started early struggled through March and April. With all of these challenges, I still expect some locally grown watermelons by mid to late June.

This yearning for a good local watermelon started me thinking about all that a farmer experiences before bringing a crop to market. Let's look at the steps that are taken with this crop before you see the delicious result at the market.

The selection of a site for growing each year is critical to success. Watermelons are very sensitive to soil borne root and stem diseases, requiring a long term crop rotation plan. Most growers prefer to use land that has never been used to grow watermelons before. Some even rent or lease nearby pasture land from neighbors in order to help avoid soil borne disease problems. Where this is not possible, the land is used mostly for other crops and only planted in watermelons every ten years or so.

Variety selection is equally important. The grower must try to determine what kind of watermelons the public will buy – round or oblong, red or yellow fleshed, seedless or seeded and with a striped or solid color rind. The mature size is also a consideration. Some customers want small melons for easy storage, while other customers prefer the biggest that they can get.

Few of the older, more familiar varieties of watermelon are grown any more. Though most have good flavor and texture, they have very little disease

resistance, so are difficult to grow under Gulf Coast conditions. Instead most growers must rely on the newer hybrids with resistance to anthracnose, fusarium wilt and other diseases. These special varieties don't come cheaply. Prices for some of the newest or most sought after varieties can cost twenty-five to fifty cents per seed.

Though spring planted watermelons rarely encounter serious insect problems, the developing vines and fruit must be protected from several leaf, stem and fruit diseases. Gummy stem blight is a constant threat, while downy mildew is known as "wildfire" because it can destroy a field of melons so quickly. To protect from these and other diseases, fields are scouted regularly and approved fungicides are used throughout the growing season as needed.

Some growers provide supplemental irrigation to watermelon fields, while others do not have this advantage and must depend upon rainfall to water the crop. Though fertilizer is applied during land preparation, additional light supplemental applications are also generally required during the growing season.

Once these and other growing practices have been performed over a three to four month period, a watermelon grower hopes to produce at least an average yield of 25,000 pounds per acre or about one thousand twenty pounds of melons.

This would seem to be a lot of watermelons and profit for the grower, even when average yields are produced. A breakdown of the cost of production tells a different story. The average cost of watermelon production in north Florida is approximately \$2,500 per acre. At a yield of 1,000 melons per acre, the break even cost would be \$2.50 each.

So, watch for locally grown watermelons and enjoy them over the next few weeks and don't fuss over paying four or five dollars for a good one. Getting them to market requires a lot of investment in time, money and worry by the grower and we didn't even discuss the rental of beehives for pollination, weed control or harvest costs. By the way, harvesting costs over fifty cents per melon. For more information or if you have a question, call Dan Mullins, Extension Commercial Horticulture Agent, The University of Florida/IFAS-Santa Rosa County Extension, at 850-623-3868, between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 pm

weekdays. Hearing-impaired individuals may call Santa Rosa County Emergency Management Service at 983-5373 (TDD).

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